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Volunteering to keep the family together

By Bill Breen
The Christian Science Monitor

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the city's teenage pregnancies.

"We're trying to keep families together," says Rolanda Pyle, volunteer coordinator of Family Dynamics.

Scattered across the country are a small but growing number of initiatives that engage older people to help at-risk youths. These programs range from established, federally funded efforts, such as the Foster Grandparent programs and longstanding school volunteer programs, to local grass-roots projects, says Marc Freedman, a program officer of the Philadelphia-based Public-Private Ventures Inc.

For example:

— In school districts in Iowa and Michigan, older volunteers teach career awareness and educational excellence to youngsters in danger of dropping out of school.

— Nonprofit programs in Maine and Illinois are drawing on the life experience of older women to assist disadvantaged teenage mothers in raising their children.

The volunteers — homemakers, a retired teacher, a social worker, and a beautician — are part of a 30-month-old intergenerational program sponsored by Family Dynamics, a nonprofit agency dedicated to preventing child abuse and neglect.

The project, based in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, a neighborhood whose teeming housing projects and boarded-up storefronts attest to decades of chronic suffering, provides a support system for struggling young mothers. Brooklyn has the highest number of reported cases of child abuse and neglect of any of New York's five boroughs and accounts for nearly half of

— older adults.

"There is a strong correlation between kids who succeed and their ability to develop good relationships with adults," says Freedman. "Traditional social programs generally fail in engaging the young. Intergenerational programs work because kids meet adult figures, not authority figures."

The process of matching adults with disadvantaged young people is not always frictionless. Many of the young suffer from a range of poverty-related problems, from unemployment to drug and alcohol abuse

to physical abuse or neglect from a parent. Often they're hostile and suspicious of adults.

"But those ill feelings tend to evaporate rather quickly," says Freedman. "The youngsters often are receptive because of their intense need. An older person becomes an extended family member, like an aunt or uncle."

For one year, Adrienne Rogers could barely pull herself up from the plastic-covered sofa that dominates the living room of her apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant housing project. Her sister died in the apartment. Her husband, a truck driver, died there

"I cried, and my kids cried louder," Rogers recalls. "There was one week where the crackheads robbed \$3 in food stamps off me. The next day one of them wanted \$5 for protection money. After that, I just stopped."

Ten months ago, Ethel Dumas began her visits to Rogers' apartment. She helped the children with their homework and taught the youngest to tie her shoes. Over coffee, Dumas confided her own troubles with raising a daughter born out of wedlock. She gave Rogers "encouraging words" and helped her through "blue days."

the following year. Left with three young daughters and no one to turn to, she was living on \$446 a month in public assistance in a roomful of memories.

"I started to communicate," says Rogers. "I even got a job at a department store for the Christmas holidays. Miss Dumas gave me courage. But it's still a struggle."

Whether the fledgling intergenerational movement realizes its potential is still in question. It is unclear whether older people will come forward in great enough numbers to enable new projects to grow. Public policy makers are somewhat resistant to intergenerational programs, because their success is not easily charted, says Freedman. But "it's easier to go on if someone is pushing you," comments Pyle of Family Dynamics. "If a mother is without hope, she has nothing left to give to her children."